

Aggression is natural

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What is Aggression?

Aggression is a forceful way of indicating feelings such as frustration, anger or despair.

The Pre-School Child

“Linda” is a healthy, usually good-natured, three-year-old. One day, while playing in her sandbox, she suddenly hit her friend with a toy shovel. Then Linda screamed and tried to take a toy away from her playmate.

Linda’s mother was astonished by the outburst and was concerned when Linda continued her aggressive behaviour for the following few days.

Linda’s mother didn’t realize that there had always been an aggressive element in her child’s behaviour. Like all healthy children, aggression had been a natural part of Linda’s life — it was one of her chief means of communication.

In babyhood, for example, Linda had thrashed and cried when wet or hungry. As her needs were met, a pattern began to form — vigorous physical movement and crying got her what she wanted.

By the time Linda was three, she had gained the strength to hit and kick and was co-ordinated enough to connect with her target — her playmate’s head or her mother’s shin.

Linda had found a more forceful means of expressing her wants, frustration and anger.

Anger

Of all the healthy and natural emotions a child displays, anger is the most frustrating. For example, when three-year-old Linda is denied a cookie before dinner, or an item when shopping, her anger and frustration is likely to be displayed by kicking and screaming. Her reaction is raw, immediate and painful. This aggressive display of anger is her way of demanding that her needs be met. She is expressing what she feels are her rights.

But her aggressive behaviour is no longer acceptable to her mother and Linda can't understand why.

Her mother thought that Linda had been selfish with her playmate. But she came to realize that Linda had no idea about other people's rights and would have to learn self-control.

Self-Control

For some children, learning self-control is a quick and painless process. Others may take years to learn acceptable ways of expressing their emotions.

Parents can help by teaching their child to redirect her anger into more constructive channels, so that other people are not hurt.

For example, the next time Linda's mother saw her hit a playmate and scream, she held Linda's hands and remained calm. She told Linda: "I know you're angry, but I can't let you hit your friend, because it hurts her."

What does Aggressive Behaviour Mean?

As a child grows and becomes curious about the world, she experiences many “do’s” and “don’ts”. She becomes frustrated and confused. A pre-school child will copy the actions of her parents and other adults. Not knowing the rules, she’ll feel it isn’t fair when she is disciplined and may get angry in order to assert her rights and needs.

Not knowing how to do things often leads to frustration and anger. Linda may want to participate in an activity that she’s not ready to handle; cross a busy street, for example. And she can’t understand why she isn’t allowed to do so. Aggressive behaviour is her way of trying to gain control of her own world and the people in it.

An aggressive child is often a fearful child. She feels that she must fight to have her needs satisfied. The aggression is her self-protection.

Guilty Feelings

A child may feel guilty after being physically aggressive, especially if she strikes out at someone she loves. Even though her anger may be justified, she may realize that uncontrolled anger leading to physical outbursts is not acceptable. Her feelings of anger and guilt can become overwhelming, especially if they are not channeled or redirected.

A parent who tries to bribe a child into good behaviour with a statement such as, “I can’t love a child who hits Mommy,” can intensify the guilt feelings, frighten the child and hinder the child’s ability to deal with anger. It would be more effective to say: “I can’t let you hit me. It hurts you and me. I know how angry you are feeling. Please tell me what you are mad about.”

Parents sometimes feel very angry towards their child, and they feel guilty about it. Such feelings are natural and there is no need to be alarmed.

What to Do

The following are suggestions about what to expect and what to do so that your child will learn to show her feelings in a constructive way.

Be Aware Keep a watchful eye on your pre-schooler at play. Frequent supervision, although time-consuming, is essential to help her learn acceptable ways of expressing feelings and developing self-control.

Act When you see trouble, move in quickly, but remain calm. Restrain your child if necessary. Holding her hands while speaking is usually enough. She may struggle and protest but she'll eventually understand that what she is doing is not acceptable.

Discipline If you feel it's necessary to discipline, explain why. Warning her not to do it again will have some effect, but often an action like separating her from her playmates will work better. Make sure that the discipline is fair and logical.

Redirect Behaviour Explain clearly that screaming and kicking won't get her what she wants. Tell her that you understand how she's feeling. Listen to her side, and come to an agreement on how to solve the problem.

For example, say: "I can't let you hit your friend. It hurts her. I know how angry you are feeling. Please tell me what you are mad about." Remain calm and in control and she will see that her feelings are not being denied or ignored. She'll begin to understand that she can get satisfaction by talking about upsets rather than by using physical force. Redirecting her behaviour helps her to understand what you expect. Praise her for trying.

Love Love is the key to helping your child learn to express her emotions appropriately. Show her that you love her. When she is behaving well, praise her — this will help her to recognize her good behaviour.

If you wait until she misbehaves before paying attention to her, you'll be teaching her that she can get attention by being bad.

Be Patient The pre-schooler has boundless energy and a relatively short memory. It takes patience and love to teach her to assert herself and to express her needs and feelings in an acceptable way. Knowing she is loved gives her the security she needs to learn to control the ways she expresses her feelings.



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